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ABSTRACT

An undergraduate course at the University of South Florida called "Relationships on Film" treats movies as relationship texts to be "read" by active viewers. Through the semester, students engage film in two ways. First, they interpret films as response papers. Each week, students watch the assigned film outside of class. Then they select the relational issues they want to address, and write about what they find most evocative, interesting, or questionable. Second, students turn a reflexive eye onto themselves and ask what values and assumptions they use to interpret relationship experience. In other words, after students write about issues they select, they examine their analyses and consider such questions as, "How am I positioned as a viewer of this film?" or "What does my selection of these issues say about me?" These questions call students to examine critically their own structures of interpretation--their memories, their family traditions, their cultural Cairo," two films that affirm that people today live in what N. Denzin Cairo," 2 films that affirm that people today live in what N. Denzin calls "a cinematic society." These "movies about movies" suggest that film mediates identity and relationships in several ways. Ingmar Bergman's "Persona" and Woody Allen's "Zelig" engage students in questions of identity. "The Virginian," "Shane," and "Red River" raise questions about what Westerns value. And "Annie Hall" and "When Harry Met Sally" help students to look at romantic relationships. (TB)

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ED 391 195

SEEING THROUGH FILM: CINEMA AS INQUIRY AND PEDAGOGY

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> The postmodern is a visual, cinematic age; it knows itself in part through the reflections that flow from the camera's eye. The voyeur is the iconic, postmodern self. Adrift in a sea of symbols, we find ourselves, voyeurs all, products of the cinematic gaze. Norman K. Denzin, *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur's Gaze*.

In our undergraduate course called "Relationships on Film," a part of the University of South Florida's communication program grounded in cultural studies and interpretivism, we assume that popular forms of communication, such as film, music, and art, circulate cultural stories that people use to attach meaning to their experience. In "Relationships on Film," we treat movies as relationship texts to be "read" by active viewers. Throughout the semester, we teach our students to engage film critically in two ways.

First, we ask them to interpret movies in response papers. Each week, students watch the assigned film outside of class. Then they select the relational issues they want to address, and we encourage them to write about what they find most evocative, interesting, or questionable. Some focus on a particular relationship; others address how the film helps them think about issues relevant to relationship studies, such as identity, language, nonverbal communication, and conflict. Students bring their response papers to class each week, and these add both depth and breadth to our conversation.

At first, many students strive to ascertain what each film "really means." They want to know the filmmaker's intent and the

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characters' motivations, believing that, if they dig deeply enough, they will uncover the "truth" of it all. However, we ask them to reject the notion of a "correct" interpretation in favor of one that helps them produce an account that makes sense of the lives and relationships portrayed. Put another way, we examine not what a film means but what it does (Denzin 1991, p. 25). In this sense, we ask them to see through film, penetrating its hidden meanings.

We teach our students to think of movies as "open texts." When we consider a text open, we recognize the multiplicity of possible interpretations. In other words, every experience of the film differs in important ways. No two viewers respond in the same manner, and even a *single* viewer can have radically different experiences with the same film.

We talk to our students about how different settings, for example, influence readings of films--watching a movie in a theater versus at the drive in versus at home; watching a film alone versus with your partner, friend, parent, or child.

We also discuss how viewings of films change with shifts in personal and/or cultural thinking. One student recounted her experience viewing Gone with the Wind, a childhood favorite, for the first time in a decade. Since she last watched it, this student had graduated high school and taken college courses for three years, including several in the women's studies department. Needless to say, Gone with the Wind looked much different through eyes ten years older.

In addition, we talk about how advances in film technology

alter both viewings and viewers. Many of our younger students grew up with the fast pace of MTV and the sophisticated editing and special effects of contemporary cinema. They often find older films--in their eyes, that means films made before 1985--and films with subtitles difficult to watch. We try to help them suspend that modern viewing consciousness so they can participate in a wider range of films than they might otherwise.

We also discuss how each viewer can have multiple reactions to a film during a single viewing, how a film might engage us cognitively and critically but fail to evoke us emotionally. Or how we might appreciate being "swept away" by a film like The Bridges of Madison County, even though we resist its troubling social, political, and moral implications.

Second, we ask our students to turn a reflexive eye onto themselves. In this sense, seeing through film means using their own interpretations of a film to see *themselves*, to better understand the values and assumptions they use to interpret relationship experience. Therefore, after students write about the issues they select, we ask them to examine their analysis and consider questions such as: How am I positioned as a viewer of this film? What does my selection of these issues say about me? How does this film speak to my life and my relationships?

These questions call students to examine critically their own structures of interpretation--their memories, their family traditions, their cultural history. These questions call them to ponder the kinds of lived experience they've had and haven't had.

And these questions call them to confront their own preferences and interpretive prejudices. In class, we bring them into conversation with other students. The diversity of interpretations shows them that meanings are always partial, contestable, and dialogic. Once students accept this, they open themselves to the legitimacy of experiences and meanings different from their own, promoting what A.L. Becker calls "an ethics of conversation."

We begin their journey with Cinema Paradiso and The Purple Rose of Cairo, two films which affirm that we live in what Norman Denzin calls "a cinematic society." These "movies about movies" suggest that film mediates our identity and our relationships in three ways.

First, films preview our future brushes with connection and separation. In Cinema Paradiso, we watch Salvatore grow up around film, first as an avid viewer, then as a projectionist, and finally as a successful director. On screen, he watches scenes of intense passion and romance between men and women who fight, against all odds, to be together forever. In "life," Salvatore searches, woman after woman, for his "one true love." Not surprisingly, all fail to measure up to the beautiful leading ladies of cinema. Ironically, Cinema Paradiso uses the medium of film to show us how films create relational expectations and desires that often go unfulfilled.

Film also mediates our lives by providing an interpretive framework for experience. In particular, the cultural narratives films offer help us make sense of epiphanies, life's existential

turning points (Denzin 1988). Cinematic scripts show us how to cope with conflict, suffering, death, and grief. Denzin (1993, p. 7) tells the story of a 38-year-old male alcoholic standing outside the door where A.A. meetings are held. The man asks:

> How to get in to one of those A.A. meetings? What do I say? I seen them in the movies. That Michael Keaton in Clean and Sober. He went to one of them. He just stood up and said he was an alcoholic. Do I have to do that?

Denzin (pp. 7-8) responds:

> A story waiting to be told, already partially told through the figure of Michael Keaton, himself an actor, playing a fictional character...who went to a fictional A.A. meeting in a Hollywood film. Here the everyday existential world connects to the cinematic apparatus, and our drunk on the street hopes to begin a story that will have a happy ending, like Michael Keaton's. He may well become the story he sees in this film. And so, as we screen our dreams and our crises through the canvases and lenses that the cinematic society makes available to us, we become storied versions of somebody else's version of who we should be. We become the stories we are told.

Finally, in some cases, film replaces human interaction altogether. Cinema Paradiso ends not with a family reconciliation or a romance begun anew but with Salvatore sitting alone in a theater watching a reel of love scenes his mentor, Alfredo, assembled for him. After watching Cinema Paradiso, one of my students told me that she remembered being five years old when her father took her and her brother to see Kramer vs. Kramer. After it was over, her father turned to them and said, "That's what's going to happen with Mommy and Daddy."

After this reflexive introduction to the potential power of cinema, we use Ingmar Bergman's Persona and Woody Allen's Zelig to engage students in questions of identity. Persona takes us into

the lives of two women who bear a striking physical resemblance: Elisabeth, a famous actress who tries to escape the roles she plays by refusing to speak, and Alma, the nurse entrusted with her care. Alma takes Elisabeth to a secluded island for a reprieve, but she remains mute. At first, Alma finds her companion's silence refreshing; Elisabeth seems an empathic listener. Later, when Alma discloses intimate details of her life, she finds Elisabeth's behavior disturbing. That is, Alma cannot tell *who she is* in Elisabeth's eyes. Perhaps she is a fool. Perhaps she is no one. Perhaps she is Elisabeth. Several times the camera merges the two women's faces, leaving it up to viewer to decide who is who. This film asks us to consider the masks we must wear, to remember the times we wished to shed those masks, and to question the existence of a "true" or "core" self underneath the layers of roles.

Zelig portrays a man who can literally alter his being according to the demands of the group he interacts with. As a "human chameleon," Leonard Zelig can even change his gender and race. This meta-documentary satirizes the code-switching we all do when interacting with different types of persons.

Both Persona and Zelig play with the notion of seeing. They rupture our faith that what we see represents the Truth. In the end, all boundaries blur between self and other, person and role, reality and illusion, life and performance, sanity and insanity.

We also take our students through the genre of Western movies. The Virginian, Shane, Red River, and even Thelma and Louise provide excellent texts for exposing the ideological functions of film.

Jane Tompkins' brilliant analysis, West of Everything, shows how films of the Western genre both reflect and reproduce cultural power and gender structures. Tompkins suggests that the Western privileges violence over peace, freedom over stability, adventure over domesticity, independence over relationship, silence over speech, stoicism over emotional expression, in short, masculinity over femininity. According to Tompkins, "the Western is secular, materialist, and antifeminist; it focuses on conflict in the public space, is obsessed by death, and worships the phallus" (p. 28). It is, in the end, "a narrative of male violence" (p. 28).

Gender continues to occupy a central position when we discuss Annie Hall and When Harry Met Sally. Both films challenge students to examine cultural narratives of attraction, friendship, romance, and marriage. In Annie Hall, romance ends when Annie finds within herself the intelligence she so admired in Alvy. As equals, the two make inadequate lovers, though eventually they become friends. In When Harry Met Sally, friendship leads to romance, which spoils friendship. The next time around, though, romance moves quickly to marriage. Not accidentally, the film ends once we walk Sally and Harry down the aisle.

As you might expect, most undergraduate students prefer the ending of When Harry Met Sally. Their comparative reactions to these films open a space for discussing how cinematic romantic ideals condition us to expect and desire happy endings and how happiness, according to Hollywood, can only be found in heterosexual marriage. When Harry Met Sally suggests that this is

especially true for women, a subtext often overlooked by our students.

A darker view of relationship life takes over in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Ordinary People, and Six Degrees of Separation. These films provide compelling examples for discussing relational dialectics and the workings of family systems in general and secrecy, trust, and betrayal in particular.

Using concepts from communication theory and borrowing heavily from Gregory Bateson, we use these films to try to move students beyond questions directed at the intrapsychic, a realm we have limited access to, even in film. Instead, we turn their attention to **interaction**. Therefore, instead of expending all our energy trying to answer why, for example, Beth cannot show warmth toward her son, Conrad, in Ordinary People, we also ask "In what kind of **context** does her behavior make sense?", "What does her distance **do** to the systems in which she's embedded?", and "How does it **feel** to the people involved and to us, the viewers?"

In addition, Six Degrees of Separation allows viewers to explore the relationship between experience and narrative. The film centers around Flanders and Ouisa Kittridge, a high society couple, who recount the story of their encounter with "Paul," a young African-American who cons his way into their lives by claiming to be a college friend of their children and the son of Sidney Poitier. By the end, Ouisa develops a close attachment to "Paul" and laments how she and Flanders used their relationship with him to gain favor from their business associates and shallow

friends. Six Degrees of Separation calls us to recognize that even the briefest connection to another can be powerfully transformative and to imagine how we might hold onto relational experience once it has passed. How can our memories and our stories keep life's critical moments alive?

The films Shadowlands and Longtime Companion show how illness impacts relationships. In Shadowlands, Jack finds love for the first time, but cancer takes his wife, Joy, away prematurely. This film allows students to consider their own experiences with suffering and grief. With Jack and Joy, we ponder the kind of life we want to live. If we choose a life of safety, Shadowlands suggests, we cannot touch the heights of happiness love brings. If we choose to love, however, we also choose the inevitable pain of loss for which we are seldom prepared.

To this discussion, Longtime Companion adds the widespread ravages of AIDS on the gay community. Blending the personal and the political, Longtime Companion takes students into a world many of them never see and can't understand. Including it on our syllabus tells our gay students that their relationship experiences and concerns count. This film also can teach our heterosexual students to be ethnographers, seeking not to judge or condemn Others on the basis of what seems different (as many of them have been raised to do), but to share in what is fundamentally the same for all humans--the needs to be loved, respected, and understood.

This theme remains critical when discussing cross-cultural relationships, as we do with The Wedding Banquet and Jungle Fever.

In The Wedding Banquet, Wai Tung and Simon live happily together, until a visit from Wai Tung's Chinese parents threatens to expose his homosexuality. Jungle Fever is Spike Lee's powerful examination of a relationship between Flipper, a married African-American man, and Angie, his Italian secretary. Both films allow us to examine how culture and tradition shape identity and color experience. They also open a forum for discussing obstacles to cross-cultural relationships, both for dyads and for social groups. Perhaps most importantly, the films take us into different ways of looking at and experiencing life. They disrupt the taken-for-granted "reality" of our worlds, challenging us to step outside our own frames and into those of people who do not think or look like we do.

"Relationships on Film" changes the way students see movies, their relationships, and themselves. At the end of the semester, many of them remark (with both praise and lament) that they "will never watch a film the same way again." After sixteen weeks of interpretive work, they see themselves as more active and more reflexive viewers. And hopefully, their encounters with other students move them to appreciate the reasoning behind and value of multiple interpretations to the same text.

As teachers of communication, we must recognize that, in our visual society, Hollywood films reflect and reconstruct our notions of close relationships. We cannot escape the power of this medium, so it seems appropriate to use it to help students become critical consumers of messages, introspective explorers of themselves, and

compassionate ethnographers among others.

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